

A FIRST VISIT TO LANTERN LANE

FIRST TUESDAY

The complete opening chapter
A free reading sample

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AN INVITATION

Before the cats. Before the garden wall. Before the house begins to feel quite like itself. Meet Nora Brennan on an ordinary November morning that is not quite as ordinary as it looks.

Chapter One

First Tuesday

Five forty-three. The bedroom ceiling was lighter than November had any business making it, and Nora lay with her eyes open for the thirty seconds it took her body to realise no alarm had sounded, no pager was going off, and no one on this earth needed anything from her.

Forty years of cellular programming. The cells were apparently having difficulty with the memo.

The heating hadn't come on yet. She pulled on the thick wool socks she'd left by the radiator the night before — a habit from a childhood of cold floors, warmth planned in advance — and went downstairs to put the kettle on.

The kitchen smelled of drying herbs and last night's soup and something older underneath, the settled smell of a house lived in alone for twenty years. She moved through it efficiently. Kettle. Mug.

The green glass jar with the loose-leaf she kept meaning to replace because the quality had slipped, and hadn't yet, because the habit of reaching for it outranked her palate.

Fourteen days retired. Two weeks of mornings she hadn't needed to account for in advance. Her body had received this information and appeared to be processing it slowly, in stages, with considerable resistance.

She took her tea to the kitchen table and looked out at the garden. November had done to it what November does: stripped it back to structure, left it honest and slightly bony. The apple tree at the back still had one yellowed leaf hanging on with what appeared to be determination. She understood the impulse. Along the wall, the herbs had gone sparse in the cold except for the rosemary, which seemed to find the whole arrangement entirely acceptable. The rosemary had always been like that. It had no patience for difficulty. Neither, particularly, did she.

The street outside began its morning. A car started somewhere down the lane, reversed carefully in the way of someone still half-asleep. A recycling bin scraped the pavement three houses along with the sound of a day already starting slightly wrong because of it. She'd been that sound for forty years.

Outside at seven, when the lane was quiet and the sky had just decided to be light, she walked. Not for exercise — she'd never called it exercise in her life, which she considered a point of personal

integrity — but because her body required movement the way other people required coffee. A first thing. Non-negotiable. Her boots were the good ones, worn dark and soft after twelve years of this, and she put them on without thinking about it, the muscle memory of getting ready for something.

The pavement was wet from overnight rain. Down near the junction, an older man was walking a very small dog with the unhurried seriousness of a long-standing commitment. He raised his hand without looking up. She raised hers back. The plane trees along the far end of the lane had finally given up almost everything; a few leaves held on in the gutters, orange and translucent, beautiful in the way of things that had stopped trying. The lamp at the end of the street threw a pale circle on the wet paving, unnecessary now that it was light, still on.

She walked past Edmund's house without slowing. The curtains were still closed. The garden had gone well past itself — roses that had once been, clearly, something, now sprawling and unattended, the bed around them thickened with weeds. She noted this the way she noted things in hospital corridors: a pattern. The information going into a file she hadn't yet labelled. She moved on.

Back to the house by eight. She fed the herbs that were looking uncertain about things, sketched the angle of light coming through the kitchen window for fifteen minutes in charcoal — not a planned sketch, just her hand moving — ate toast standing at the counter because she still couldn't make herself sit down for breakfast the way a

person with unstructured time was apparently supposed to, and left for the café at half past ten.

The Moss & Honey was ten minutes down the hill and one left turn, on a side street that felt slightly apart from the rest of the neighbourhood, in the way of places that have simply been themselves for a long time. The building had been a café of one kind or another for as long as anyone locally could remember. You could tell this the way you could tell certain things about buildings: not from the sign or the decor but from the arrangement of the space itself, the ease of it.

The smell reached her before the door did — cardamom and soup stock and beeswax and something herbal and green underneath, something Delia must have been steeping. Candles along the counter, because Delia ran the candles all winter regardless of the hour. Mismatched chairs and tables. Shelves holding tea jars and honey and small handmade things. The walls had paintings, local artists mostly, and in the corner three of Nora's charcoal sketches that she had given Delia years ago and had always declined to acknowledge in conversation.

Delia was behind the counter, engaged with the coffee machine in the thoughtful, unhurried way she approached most things. She looked up, took a moment, and said: "Green smoothie?"

"Please," Nora said, and found the window table, which was empty. It was always empty for them by half eleven. Nobody had arranged this.

It had become true through repetition.

She was pulling off her coat when the door opened and Natalia came in with Maya, both of them bringing November in on their coats. Natalia was unwinding a scarf the colour of autumn bracken. Maya was in her purple jacket, carrying a notebook under one arm and what appeared to be a bag of wool.

"You're early," Natalia said.

"I'm always early. I just didn't used to call it that."

Natalia sat across from her, pulling off gloves. Maya scrambled into the chair beside Nora without ceremony and opened the notebook immediately — it was full of pencil drawings of animals, carefully labelled, several of the labels featuring editorial notes such as (*wrong colour but I think it knew*) and (*sleepy but fine*).

"What's in the bag?" Nora asked.

Maya looked into it with the seriousness of an inventory check. "Wool," she said. "I'm making a mouse."

Natalia ordered the Wellness Warmer, which was ginger and lemon and Manuka honey and which she'd maintained had kept her illness-free for four winters running. Nora had always found this statistically unconvincing. She'd said so twice, registered that this was an argument she wasn't going to win, and dropped the subject.

Delia brought the smoothie. Nora picked it up and drank some.

The thing about the green smoothie was that she'd been ordering it for three years, since Delia had added it to the menu and Nora had tried it out of curiosity and found it genuinely energising in a way that the third cup of coffee at the nurses' station demonstrably wasn't. She ordered it now because that was what she ordered here. The known thing. A life run at speed had always required a few of those.

She set the glass down and looked at it.

She wasn't tired.

Not in the post-shift, still-blurred way. Not in the background-exhaustion way that had been the honest cost of forty years at speed — so consistent she'd stopped registering it as exhaustion and had started calling it Tuesday. Not tired in any way she could locate. She'd slept. She'd walked. She'd eaten toast.

The smoothie was, she realised, unnecessary.

She drank some more of it while she thought about this.

"You look strange," Maya said, without looking up from the mouse.

"Thank you."

"I mean strange like you're thinking something surprising."

"I'm always thinking something."

"Yeah, but like surprised-thinking. Like when you expect a word and you read a different one."

Nora looked at her. "That's very precise."

"I read about faces," Maya said. "In a book. What does the other word look like?"

"Slightly unnecessary," Nora said. "It's nothing. Drink your juice."

Maya had not ordered juice and was currently drinking nothing. She took this in stride.

The conversation found its way around, as it always did. Natalia's week: a difficult meeting navigated well, and something her neighbour had done with a window box that she found philosophically interesting in a way she hadn't fully worked out yet. Maya's week: a geography project completed and returned with a note saying very good in a tone Maya felt suggested surprisingly, which she reported with the precise outrage of someone who prefers their assessments unqualified. The café filled and thinned and filled again. A woman at the next table was reading something thick, her coffee going cold beside her, forgotten.

Eventually, as Natalia's hands wrapped around the Wellness Warmer, she said: "How is it? The second week."

"Cold," Nora said. "Specifically, the house in the mornings."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"I know." She turned the smoothie glass slowly on the table. "The house is cold in the mornings. The tea takes longer than I think it will. Yesterday I stood in the kitchen for seven full minutes before I remembered I'd gone in for toast." She paused. "So. That."

Natalia waited. That was one of her qualities: she waited without it feeling like waiting. She was simply there in the conversation, fully present, in no hurry to fill the space.

"It's quiet," Nora said. "I hadn't expected it to be quiet in the way it is. I'd expected quiet like absence. Like something had been taken away. But it's more like—" She stopped, looking out at the street. Two schoolboys went past at speed. A woman with a pushchair navigated the narrow pavement with the competence of long practice. "Like when you stop standing next to something loud. The noise isn't there anymore. But you're also starting to hear things that were already there. Things you hadn't been hearing over it."

A small silence. Maya had produced a grey shape from the wool and was examining it from several angles.

"There's something in that," Natalia said.

"Don't make it into something."

"I'm not."

"You have the face."

"I don't have a face."

"You have several faces. That was the one that means you've found a metaphor and you're deciding whether to say it."

Natalia smiled, briefly. "My grandmother had a word for what you're describing. Not translatable, really. She'd say the real sound of a place needs time to come back after something loud has been living in it. Days, sometimes. She'd had a room once that took three days." She tilted her head slightly. "She was very specific about the three days."

"Your grandmother," Nora said, "was quite the thing."

"The original, yes."

"What's a rhubarb?" Maya said, not looking up.

They both looked at her.

"An embarrassed celery," Maya said.

Natalia pressed her mouth together. Nora's expression did what it did when something was funnier than she'd expected.

"Where," Nora said, "did that come from."

"I've been collecting them." Maya held the mouse up and assessed it from one angle, then another. "For serious situations. You were both doing the quiet thing."

"Was this a serious situation?"

Maya considered this with genuine care. "A bit. You had the smoothie face."

"The smoothie face."

"The one you make when the smoothie isn't the point."

Nora looked at the smoothie, and then at Maya. "You're eight years old," she said.

"I know," said Maya, and turned the mouse over.

Sebastian came up, as he usually did when he'd been absent for a while, through a message Natalia had received this morning. There'd apparently been a period of being somewhere else that the others already knew about and Nora was arriving at the tail end of.

"Did he say where he'd been?" Nora asked.

"He said the silence was architectural. Which he appeared to intend as a full answer."

"Was it not Bordeaux again?"

"There may also have been Bordeaux."

"And 'architectural silence' — is that the cave or is this something new?"

"The cave, I think." Natalia wrapped both hands around the mug. "He says he goes to find the parts of himself that get drowned out by

ordinary life. He said it slightly more dramatically than that."

"I'd expect nothing less."

"He's back Thursday. He mentioned cheese."

"He always has cheese," Nora said. "It's how he tells people he loves them."

Maya looked up immediately. "Cheese is I love you?"

"For Sebastian, yes."

"That's better than saying it," Maya decided, with the finality of someone who had resolved the question.

She left at two, when Natalia had to take Maya to her art lesson. Outside, the November afternoon was already thinking about giving up — the sky low and pale, the light that flat grey that made buildings look like they were absorbing it rather than reflecting it. She turned up her collar and headed back toward the lane.

The walk home took longer than it needed to, because she let it. Not the time — she'd always had two legs and the lane had always been the same distance — but the quality of it, the way the attention moved freely rather than scanning ahead. She noticed things.

The butcher's window was steamed from the inside, the light behind it going amber as the afternoon failed. The corner house had window boxes she'd walked past for years, mostly bare now but for a few small

purple flowers still going, their name something she didn't know and would find out. There was a crack in the second paving stone past the post box, a long diagonal split she'd been stepping over for twenty years, which she'd always registered as something to step over rather than a fact in itself. She stopped in front of it now. The slab had settled into the gap with a slight tilt, the way things do when they've had years to adjust. It had been there long before she'd noticed it.

Lantern Lane was quiet at this hour, the lamp at the far end already on. She paused at Edmund's house without quite meaning to — the same half-stop as this morning, the attention directing itself somewhere she hadn't consciously aimed it. The curtains still closed. The garden gone past itself. She filed it under insufficient data and walked on.

At her own gate she stopped. Something was crossing the back wall of the garden — a dark shape, unhurried, moving from one shadow into the next. By the time she'd looked properly it was gone, if it had been there at all. She stood for a moment at the gate in the cold. The garden was still. Just the rosemary, the bare apple tree, the last of the light.

She went in.

Made tea with the decent loose-leaf — the one in the back of the cupboard, finally, the jar she'd been saving for some reason she couldn't now justify — and took it to the kitchen table while it was still hot, which she managed for once. The garden outside was going

dark.

Out came the sketchbook. A new page. She drew the lamp at the end of the lane: the way it looked coming around the corner from the lower end of the hill, certain in its circle of light against the flat grey sky, the wet pavement below it gone silver.

An hour passed without her noticing. The tea cooled past the point she usually drank it. She looked at the sketch when she was done — the lamp in its circle, the specific quality of late-November light on a lane she'd been walking for twenty years and had apparently only just begun to look at properly.

Well, she thought. That was what a Tuesday looked like when it belonged to you.

She made toast and ate it at the table, in a chair, sitting down properly, for the first time since she'd left.

The story continues in The Catkeeper of Lantern Lane, Book One of The House the Cats Chose.

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